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Psychiatry, Psychology and the Progressive Movement

RECENT INTERPRETATIONS HAVE MADE THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT OF THE pre-1917 era one of the most interesting topics in American history. Much of this new scholarship represents the search of modern liberals for their own political identity. Currently a more thoroughgoing reinterpretation is being undertaken by a group of historians who are studying *social control* as the Progressives visualized it and put it into action.[1] This latest research on Progressivism ranges far beyond what is essentially political history.

A study of the two professions dealing with the human psyche, psychiatry and psychology, before World War I, contributes to a broader view of Progressivism by suggesting the hypothesis that the Progressive movement was not limited to politics, economics and social philosophy, but pervaded all of the endeavors of middle-class Americans. If the physicians and scientists of the mind were prototypical, an examination of the rest of national life—as it is ordinarily subdivided—will also show that early twentieth-century Americans in their occupations and other social capacities operated on "Progressive" assumptions or at least were aware of the relevance of their activities to "Progressive" ends.[2] The basis for the hypothesis is the striking fact that reformers in psychiatry and psychology shared with reformers in politics and economics a set of social assumptions that indentified them all as Progressives.

From the more traditional research on the subject we already know the suppositions of Progressivism. The essence of the movement was the

1 For a partial treatment of social control, see Stow Persons, *American Minds, A History of Ideas* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1958), chap. xxv, and Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence, A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), pp. 154-58.

2 Each area also had its conservatives analogous to Aldrich and Taft.

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"firm belief that to a considerable degree man could make and remake his own world." [3] Although the Progressives did not all believe that man is inherently good, they agreed at least that the human being is malleable. The responsibility for the ills of the world rested, therefore, largely or entirely upon the social environment in which the individual lived.[4] Although modern environmentalism grew out of Darwinian thinking, the Progressives believed that man could change his own environment and so reconstruct both societies and individuals.[5]

The most elusive element in the basic social thinking of the Progressives was—who should tamper with the environment and so foreordain the fates of his fellow men? It turned out, inevitably, that the Progressives themselves were to be the self-appointed arbiters of man's destiny. They were able, literate and largely professional groups, accustomed to the role of leadership and, like Theodore Roosevelt, unafraid of it.[6]

The Progressives were consciously motivated by altruism. Direction was to come from the Man of Good Will who had transcended his own interests; he governed by right of his moral superiority.[7] The Calvinistic background of many Progressives indicated a direct relationship as well as an analogy between Progressive leadership and the stewardship of the elect. Social responsibility inspired in many Progressives a feeling of guilt for all of the evil that a faulty society had caused, and the sophisticated with New England consciences equated righteousness with social reform.[8]

[3] George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt, 1900-1912* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), pp. 17-18, 37.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51. David W. Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), summarizes the views of the high priest of Progressivism, Herbert Croly, on the subject, p. 62.

[5] Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny, A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 94; Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 50. Such thinking was not far distant from other doctrines of the times, such as an economic interpretation of history.

[6] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform, From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), has been pre-eminent in suggesting as a major factor in Progressivism the changing status of certain middle-class groups, chap. iv; and Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt,* has documented the middle-class nature of Progressive leadership, pp. 85 ff. (Psychiatrists and psychologists in general belonged to this dominant part of the middle class.) The Progressive reliance on the executive and the cult of the strong man were notable contemporaneous developments; *ibid.*, p. 88; Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny,* p. 80; Noble, *Paradox of Progressive Thought,* p. 74. Even the Progressives' faith in democracy was dependent upon their providing a proper environment for that democracy. See the sophisticated discussion of Progressivism in May, *End of American Innocence,* pp. 21-29.

[7] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform,* p. 258; compare the summary in Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt,* pp. 104-5.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 87; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform,* pp. 204-6, 208-12.

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These, then, were the elements of Progressivism—optimism, environmentalism, moral fervor and leadership by an enlightened elite. None of them was new in American thought, but at the time they took on a special meaning because of the frequency with which they appeared and because of their application to social control. Although most obvious in political and social thinking, they also characterized, first, the psychotherapy movement in the psychiatry of that day and, second, the revolt of the behaviorists in contemporaneous psychology. In each case it turned out that an autonomous historical development within a science contained the same elements as a new political and social movement.

Psychiatry (which at that time included neurology) provides a nice example. In the late nineteenth century, physicians who dealt with the mentally ill usually were "organicists" who adhered strictly to scientific materialism. They believed that behavior and thinking were but the expression of the functioning of the nervous system and that physical defects or diseases were at the bottom of all mental diseases. The organicists performed autopsies on the brains of deceased mental patients, searching for evidence of lesions or brain damage. The work of this group was vindicated by the discovery that a common type of insanity was caused by syphilis. Yet nothing is quite as depressing as the literature of psychiatry-neurology around the turn of the century—endless reports of post-mortem examinations of demented brains and discussions of the problems of keeping and managing the insane. The psychiatrist was expected to do little more than deliver a prognosis of the melancholy course of the disease and then supervise the housing, feeding and restraining of the patient.[9] Well into the twentieth century the three main causes of insanity were thought to be heredity, alcohol and syphilis.[10]

By the 1890's a great deal of discussion of hysteria (disease symptoms occurring in the absence of physical disease), hypnotism and faith healing, plus a rebellion against the dreary routine of prognosis and commitment, led to a revival of attention to so-called "moral treatment." Every experienced physician knew the importance of the patient's state of mind for the treatment of illness, and early in the first decade of the century, following developments in continental Europe, American medical practitioners took up the fad of psychotherapy. In large part the psychotherapy movement was a formal recognition of the medical value of a

[9] The cure rate was about twenty per cent; A. I. Noble, "The Curability of Insanity," *American Journal of Insanity,* LXIX (1913), 715-17.

[10] E.g., H. M. Swift, "Insanity and Race," *American Journal of Insanity,* LXX (1913), 154.

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constructive intellectual and emotional environment, especially in the treatment of what we would now call neurotic diseases.[11]

Strict organicists who believed that insanity was caused by heredity, alcohol and syphilis were not necessarily outside of the Progressive movement. There were reform groups dedicated to the elimination of the baneful effects of all three. The eugenics movement, advocating the sterilization of insane, defective and criminal persons in order to improve the race, represented the Progressive attempt to deal with that part of man which was not malleable.[12] Many psychiatrists supported the efforts of the prohibitionists to remove from commerce what they regarded as social poison. And one of the lasting reforms of Progressivism was effected by the crusaders (many of them physicians) who opposed both prostitution and promiscuity with the powerful argument that only prevention could control venereal diseases.[13] These were typical Progressive reform movements, but Progressive psychiatrists fought their finest—and most fundamental—battles in the name of psychotherapy.

Basically the physicians who employed or advocated psychotherapy in any of its many forms were unwilling to accept the pessimistic attitude of current psychiatry and neurology. Under the competitive pressure of Christian Science and other faith cures that were demonstrably effective, these physicians ignored materialism and undertook to cure patients by whatever method worked. Effective psychotherapy required hope—indeed, faith in the patient's ability to cure himself. C. P. Oberndorf, one of the first psychoanalytic psychotherapists in the United States, later attributed his early successes in treatment to his enthusiasm and to his confidence in the new tools with which he worked. Others using quite different methods of psychotherapy likewise showed an optimism that set them apart from conservatives in the psychiatric profession.[14]

[11] See Walter Bromberg, *Man Above Humanity, A History of Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1954), chap. viii.

[12] Mark Hughlin Haller, "American Eugenics: Heredity and Social Thought, 1870-1930" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1960), especially pp. 4, 157-58, shows how Progressives' assumptions of environmentalism did not deter them from supporting the eugenics movement.

[13] For somewhat different views, see Louis Filler, *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (2d ed., Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Press, 1950), chap. xxii, and Harold Underwood Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice, 1898-1914* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), pp. 159-62.

[14] C. P. Oberndorf, *A History of Psychoanalysis in America* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1953), p. 152. E.g., see the revealing paper, Charles W. Burr, "The Prevention of Insanity and Degeneracy," *American Journal of Insanity,* LXXIV (1917), 409-24, and especially the discussion, 422-23.

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The basis for the new hope was the conviction that an individual's behavior was determined—to a large extent—by his environment. A Boston physician in 1909 defined psychoneurotics "as people who, for one reason or another, are not well adapted to their environment." The conclusion was obvious; as one psychiatrist observed in 1911, "If the mental habits and the surroundings of an individual are largely responsible for the onset of a psychosis, we can look forward to accomplishments which may rival the success achieved in the crusade against tuberculosis."[15]

The psychotherapists' primary objective became, then, to re-educate the patient so that he adapted himself to his environment, adjusted himself to the reality that surrounded him. Thoughtful physicians quickly perceived that the largest part of the environment that required the patient to change his conduct was the society in which he lived, including his family. A New York asylum superintendent reported in 1913 that "The patient is no longer regarded simply as a separate individual, but also as a social unit, whose cure cannot be considered complete until he has been restored to social adaptability and efficiency."[16] At the same time physicians saw the possibility of altering not just the patient but also his environment. Since the important environment was social, the forward-looking psychiatrists found themselves committed to social meliorism, and therefore were Progressives indeed.[17]

The environment of children was especially a target for the social-reformer psychiatrists. Under the influence of early Freudian ideas, they asserted that childhood experiences were of overwhelming importance in later life. The most influential of these psychiatrists was William Healy, a conventionally trained specialist in nervous and mental diseases, who gave up his practice (at considerable sacrifice) in 1909 to work with juvenile delinquents in Chicago. Through his own experience with the motivations of youthful lawbreakers, Healy came to a strongly psychoanalytic point of view. His works (richly illustrated with interesting case histories) persuaded untold numbers of persons that favorable changes

[15] Richard C. Cabot, "The Analysis and Modification of Environment," *Psychotherapy,* III, No. 3 (1909), 5. James V. May, "The Modern Trend of Psychiatry," *Interstate Medical Journal,* XVIII (1911), 1098.

[16] E.g., see the systematic work of Morton Price, "The Subconscious Setting of Ideas in Relation to the Pathology of the Psychoneuroses," *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology,* XI (1916), 1-18. William L. Russell, "The Widening Field of Practical Psychiatry," *American Journal of Insanity,* LXX (1913), 460. E.g., William A. White, *The Principles of Mental Hygiene* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1917), p. 316.

[17] E.g., C. C. Wholey, in *The Journal of the American Medical Association,* LXII (1914), 1036. Thomas W. Salmon, "Some New Fields in Neurology and Psychiatry," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease,* XLVI (1917), 90-99.

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in the social environments of youngsters could prevent delinquency and promote not only mental health but social progress.[18]

The presumptuousness of psychiatrists in deciding how the world should be run was not different from that of other Progressives. Like Dr. George Van Ness Dearborn of Boston, physicians appealed to "the sound principle of *noblesse oblige*." Moreover, as doctors they dealt with matters of life and death, and as psychotherapists in daily practice they undertook to interfere in and change the attitudes and ways of life of their patients. They were, therefore, accustomed to the responsibilities of leadership. As early as 1907 E. W. Taylor of Boston pointed out that the role of the physician was expanding and that he had to look after the social as well as the physical welfare of his patients. He was becoming, said Lewellys Barker of Johns Hopkins, the "moral director" of his patients.[19]

A number of theories were used by the psychotherapists in rationalizing their attempts to recast the world. A New York neurologist who advocated a type of psychotherapy called suggestion proposed in 1912 that physicians combat the psychic infections of civilization—noxious suggestion—with psychotherapy, that is, with suggestion that would foster what he believed to be the better cultural elements (surely an ambiguous goal for social control).[20] Most Americans were not strong on systematics, and hope sufficed to nourish many of their opinions; only those who used the most radical of the psychotherapies, psychoanalysis, invoked a fairly consistent theory to justify their reformism.[21]

The psychoanalysts, whose alleged commitment to a so-called "sexual"

18 E.g., William Healy, *The Individual Delinquent: A Text-Book of Diagnosis and Prognosis for All Concerned in Understanding Offenders* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1915); William Healy, *Mental Conflicts and Misconduct* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1917), especally chap. xvii. Healy's case affords evidence of a situation in which political Progressives had a direct influence on the development of psychiatry. In an interview with the writer Dr. Healy remarked that the method of studying children (integrating medical, social, psychometric and psychiatric studies of a single individual) which yielded him such rich results was suggested in large part by a group of social reformers associated with Hull House and led by Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop, two of the best-known Progressives. The Hull House reformers found financial support for the work and invited Healy to undertake it.

19 George Van Ness Dearborn, *The Influence of Joy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1916), p. 35. E. W. Taylor, "The Attitude of the Medical Profession Toward the Psychotherapeutic Movement," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal,* CLVII (1907), 845-46. Lewellys F. Barker, "On the Psychic Treatment of Some of the Functional Neuroses," *International Clinics,* I (17th ser., 1907), 13, 15, 17.

20 George W. Jacoby, *Suggestion and Psychotherapy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), chap. ii, especially pp. 207, 218-19.

21 E.g., J. T. W. Rowe, "Is Dementia Praecox the 'New Peril' in Psychiatry?" *American Journal of Insanity,* LXIII (1907), 389, 393, Even most American psychoanalysists in this early period, it must be admitted, had less regard for theoretical consistency than their European counterparts.

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view of the world was notorious, illustrated most strikingly the intense moralism of the Progressive psychiatrists. By means of sublimation man's evil would be turned into good, they asserted; even the grossest sexual perversions would become artistic creations and love for fellow man. James Jackson Putnam, scion of the Puritans, married to a Cabot, and professor of neurology at Harvard, wrote: "It may well be urged that psychoanalysis does not take the cultivation of social ideals as an end for which it should directly strive. Technically, this is true. But psychoanalysts know well the evils that attend the over-assertion of personal desires, cultivated too exclusively in and for themselves, and the importance of the opposite course follows by inference." In their long, conventional textbook on nervous and mental diseases, two of the leading psychiatrists of the country, Smith Ely Jelliffe and William A. White, reminded their readers of the "socially useful ends" of psychotherapy. As sophisticated about right and wrong as the most advanced intellectual rebels of the time, Progressive psychiatrists found altruism medically justifiable.[22]

Some of the psychotherapists were psychologists who had abandoned strictly experimental psychology. Like the psychiatrists, these men tended to be lay preachers who sought to reform the world by means of re-education and retraining. The scholarly psychologist of Boston, L. E. Emerson, for example, repeatedly pointed out the ethical and reform possibilities of Freudianism. More orthodox psychologists were likewise led, when dealing with matters outside of experimental psychology, to dilate on the possibilities of fostering the "higher aspirations" of men through psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.[23] The best example of the foregoing is the famous book of E. B. Holt of Harvard on *The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics*.[24] Holt asserted that Freudian psychology justified the ancient belief that knowledge is virtue, with the implication that evil need not be always with us. Holt saw man as an individual interacting with his environment and, significantly, utilized not only

[22] James J. Putnam, "The Psychoanalytic Movement," *Scientific American Supplement,* LXXVIII (1914), 391, 402. Freud commented regretfully on Putnam's inclination to make psychoanalysis "the servant of moral aims." Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study,* trans. by James Strachey (2d ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1946), p. 94. Smith Ely Jelliffe and William A. White, *Diseases of the Nervous System, A Text-Book of Neurology and Psychiatry* (2d ed., Philadelphia: Lee & Febiger, 1917), p. 98. James J. Putnam, "On Some of the Broader Issues of the Psychoanalytic Movement," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences,* CXLVII (1914), 397-402.

[23] E.g., Ernest K. Lindley, in *The Journal of the Indiana State Medical Association,* IX (1916), 7; Stephen S. Colvin, "What Dreams Mean," *The Independent,* LXXII (1912), 847.

[24] Edwin B. Holt, *The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1915).

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psychoanalytic psychology but also behaviorism. For within orthodox experimental psychology the Progressives were those who adhered to behaviorism.[25]

For years psychologists had been aware of ferment and discontent in their profession. Most of the criticism centered around the fact that dry, descriptive academic psychology was not useful. Then John B. Watson took leadership of the revolt of the behavioristic psychologists. They dispensed with consciousness and introspective methods and studied the human organism in its environment, using the methods of animal psychology. Watson began his behaviorist manifesto in 1913 by making the purpose of the revolt clear: "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the *prediction and control of behavior*."[26] Here was usefulness with a vengeance.

The behaviorists had observed that animals' innate patterns of action could be modified by training, and the young Turks soon tended to embrace a radical environmentalism. Most psychologists more or less covertly subscribed to an instinct psychology such as that of William James or William McDougall. Now out of the laboratory itself came a challenge to essentially conservative nativism.[27] One would misunderstand behaviorism if he overlooked the explicit meliorism involved in the movement. Watson himself took pains to clarify the relation of behaviorism to social control, and the more alert members of the profession also realized what was involved.[28] The goal of behaviorism was, after all, merely a restatement of the classical purpose of any science including psychology: to predict. And prediction, to the Progressive behaviorists as to other scientists, involved control.[29]

The elements of Progressivism thus appeared as conspicuous features of reform movements within psychology and psychiatry. The mass of

[25] The social psychologies of men such as G. H. Mead and J. Mark Baldwin were too close to social philosophy to be properly included here. A case might be made, however, for including G. Stanley Hall and the genetic psychology of that time.

[26] John B. Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," *The Psychological Review,* XX (1913), 158; see also 168-69, 177. Italics added. For an interesting variation with Freudian elements, see John B. Watson and J. J. B. Morgan, "Emotional Reactions and Psychological Experimentation," *The American Journal of Psychology,* XXVIII (1917), 163-74.

[27] E.g., see M. E. Haggerty, "The Laws of Learning," *The Psychological Review,* XX (1913), 411; Howard C. Warren, "The Mental and the Physical," *ibid.,* XXI (1914), 99.

[28] E.g., see John B. Watson, "An Attempted Formulation of the Scope of Behavior Psychology," *ibid.,* XXIV (1917), 329-52; A. P. Weiss, "Relation Between Functional and Behavior Psychology," *ibid.,* pp. 353-68.

[29] See John Dewey, "The Need for Social Psychology," *ibid.,* pp. 274-75.

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material in both sciences remained, as before, primarily descriptive. But the social attitudes of some of the practitioners of the two disciplines led to profound changes in the very nature of psychiatry and psychology, just as Progressivism left its mark on American political and social institutions.

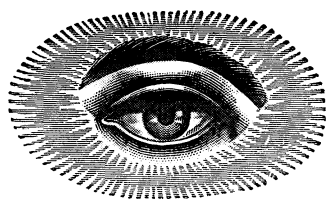
Progressive psychiatry and Progressive psychology were uniquely American phenomena. The European professional literature was devoid of the optimistic social reformism of the New World versions of these disciplines. Psychologist Carl Rahn shrewdly epitomized the situation in his observation about psychoanalysis: "Where the European follower of Freud emphasizes the point that the formulation of the symbol is indicative of a 'renunciation of reality,'" wrote Rahn, "the American disciple sees it as a 'carrier of energy' exquisitely fitted for increasing man's control over his environment. . . ."[30]

One can easily account for the rise of psychotherapy and the rise of behaviorism in terms of the internal histories of psychiatry and psychology. But the fact that these movements coincided in time with the Progressive social reform movement, and the fact that social control was an aim of reformers in both politics and science, can be accounted for only by treating the developments in psychiatry and psychology and in all other middle-class endeavors as part and parcel of the Progressive movement itself.[31] The historian will discover the full dynamics of Progressivism only when he examines not just politics, economics and social philosophy, but all aspects of American life.[32]

[30] See Edwin G. Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology* (2d ed., New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1950), pp. 642-43. Carl Rahn, in a review of W. A. White, *Mechanisms of Character Formation,* in *The Psychological Bulletin,* XIV (1917), 327. The absence of a British counterpart is especially striking in view of the nearly contemporaneous reform movement there.

[31] The intellectual spokesmen for Progressivism were well aware of the possibilities of the new movements in psychiatry and psychology; e.g., see Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York: M. Kennerley, 1913).

[32] Even though not focusing on Progressivism, May, *End of American Innocence,* gives an idea of the light that can be shed on the movement by an approach such as the one suggested here.



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